

Kalash Kafirs

PAKISTAN



The pagan Kalash or 'Kalash Kafirs'—perhaps 2,500 people altogether—live in three valleys in western Chitral, a part of northern Pakistan lying at the eastern extremity of the Hindu Kush mountain range. The entire region, just south of the place where the Soviet Union, China, and Afghanistan converge, is a mosaic of different cultures. This is partly due to the numerous mountain ranges and poor communications, which have also perpetuated the long isolation of many of these communities.

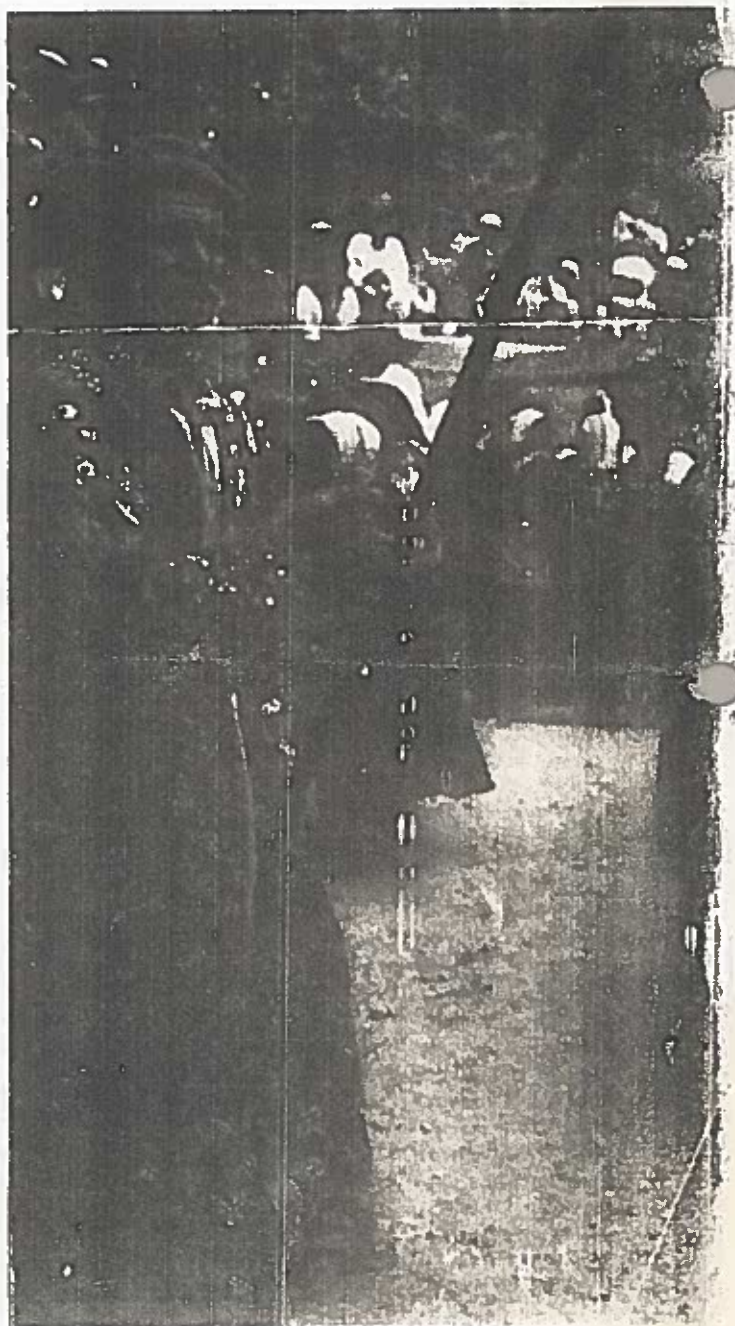
The three short Kalash valleys—Berir, Bomboret, and Rumbur—contain some twenty small, permanent villages. The Kalash culture is especially interesting because there is every indication that it is extremely old, and has survived successive waves of Buddhist, Hindu, and Moslem influences, without being absorbed by them. They early acquired the epithet 'Kafir'—the Arabic word for unbelievers—and today the Kalash form what has been described as a 'pagan island in a Moslem sea'.

The Kalash are farmers and have two separate main economic activities, which coincide with their division of labour: arable agriculture is women's work, and livestock herding the men's responsibility. The main grain crops are wheat, barley and maize, but a variety of fruit is also grown, including walnuts, apricots, grapes and mulberries. Their livestock includes sheep and cattle, but the most important domestic animal bred by the Kalash is the goat.

Little is known about the early history of these people; and practically nothing prior to the mid-19th century, when Europeans began to explore that part of the world. Early travellers reported that the Kalash were 'slaves' of the rulers of Chitral. At best, they referred to them as the 'subject Kalash'. But this impression was apparently based on nothing more than the fact that the Kalash paid an annual tribute to the Mehtar of Chitral. It seems that during the 19th century, and probably for long before that, the Kalash were skilled in the game of political and cultural survival. Being neither numerous nor warlike, the Kalash needed defences against political incursions by more powerful neighbours.

The game they chose to play was one in which they avoided a military take-over by going to the most powerful of their neighbours and offering to pay tribute. The neighbour they chose was the Mehtar of Chitral. By accepting annual tribute from the Kalash, the Mehtar also accepted a certain responsibility for their well-being, if only to maintain the patron-client relationship. The Kalash, on the other hand, no doubt felt that the tribute was a small price to pay for political security. The relative inaccessibility of the Kalash valleys also afforded a degree of security which was to the advantage of both parties to the agreement. Kalash territory thus formed a small buffer zone between Chitral and the fiercely aggressive warrior peoples of the Bashgal Valley, with whom the Mehtar wanted a minimum of contact.

These various geographical and political factors combined to preserve Kalash culture, even through the violent upheavals of the Afghan invasion of Kafiristan (1896-1900). This followed the establishment of the 'Durand



Line—Afghanistan's boundary with what was then the Northwest Frontier Province of India. That event also coincided with the extension of British influence to include Chitral, and the threat to the Kalash way of life was removed for a time.

Kalash villages are compact, shaded by numerous large trees, and surrounded by small irrigated fields. The houses are often constructed from alternate layers of timber and stone, sometimes with fine relief carvings on the wooden panels. Other houses are of an all-timber construction. Most dwellings have a separate wooden outbuilding which serves as a granary and general storeroom.

Wealth among the Kalash is measured in goats, which families breed not only for economic sufficiency, but also to meet social and religious requirements. The successful man is one who has utilized his resources to meet approved goals both economically and socially. Goats—the mainstay of so many mountain communities in Central and South Asia—represent an ideal form of wealth for most

herdsmen.

In the first place they are good milk producers, and excellent cheese can easily be made from their milk using simple techniques. Long goat hair is made into cord, rope, rugs, and crochet purses and leggings. Goatskin, even without proper tanning, is used for sacks, moccasins, and drumheads. The meat is a highly popular source of food. Goats are extremely hardy, and can travel long distances over difficult terrain. They need relatively little water even in the hottest weather, and will eat anything.

The aspect of Kalash culture that has most interested scholars is their religion. The Kalash view their home valleys as an area of ritual purity and consider that the

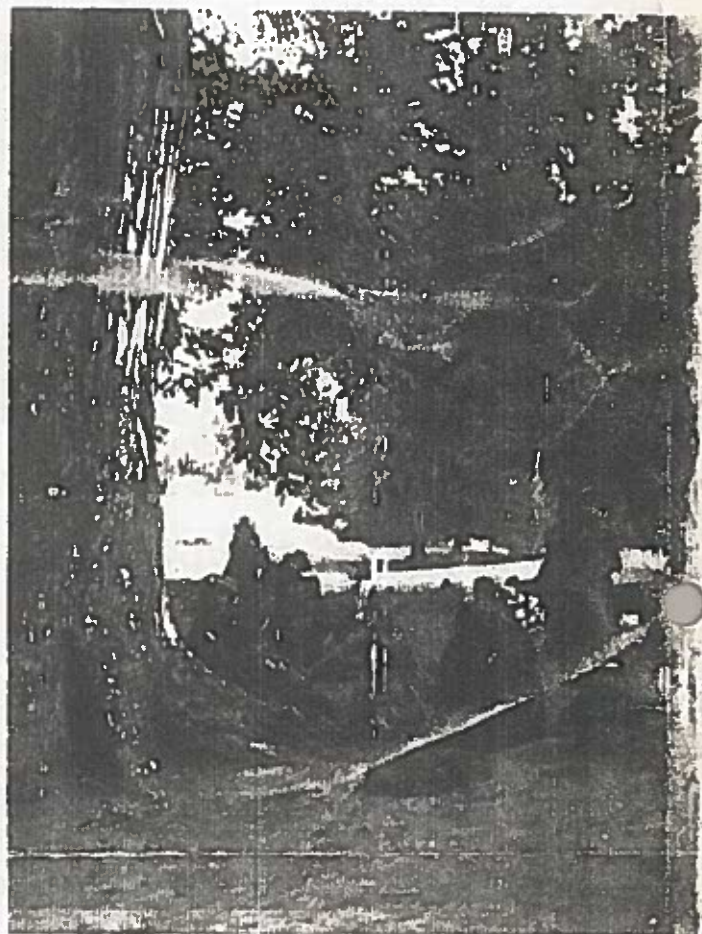
Kalash Kafirs dance during the Joshi spring festival, calling on the spirits to protect both people and livestock. Although known as 'pagan' by their Moslem neighbours, the Kalash have an immensely rich religious life.





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(Above) Kalash men encourage their goats across an icy stream. Goats are an ideal form of wealth in the mountains—they are well suited to the harsh environment, and are a source of food and clothing.



(Right) A woman piper wears the traditional head-dress—a small chaplet of coloured beads. The pipe is a popular instrument among the Kalash, for whom music is the most common evening entertainment.

surrounding Moslem-occupied territories are impure. In theory, any Kalash who ventures outside the three valleys becomes impure, just as a Moslem traveller or settler in the Kalash valleys is a source of impurity. In practice, however, there is a good deal of coming and going by both Kalash men and Moslems, and the purification ceremonies are not always performed.

The purity of the Kalash valleys is therefore continually being eroded, constituting a drain on moral and sacred resources. Carried to a logical conclusion, this would eventually mean the end of Kalash supernatural beliefs, but the Kalash culture has proved extremely resilient in the face of changing circumstances. One hundred years ago, to a few European observers, they appeared politically insignificant and culturally worthless by comparison with the people across the border in Kafirstan. And yet the Kalash alone of all these peoples have managed to retain their own religious beliefs and practices. All the others have become Moslem.

The Kalash have many gods. The creator is named *Deza*, next to him in rank is *Sajjigor*, and the most popular deity is *Mahandeu*. There are several altars, shrines and other ritual places in the three valleys, and at certain times of the year people from different villages gather at



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these places for the important annual festivals. The Spring Festival (*Joshi*) occurs in May and lasts for several days and nights. Goats are sacrificed and dances performed to ensure that the *markhor*, a species of wild goat, will continue to roam the mountains, that the sick will become well, and that the spirits will protect both people and livestock. Bread is taken to the cemeteries for the dead, and processions of people go to the stables to receive cheese and milk. The festival reaches its climax in a mass ecstatic dance which drives demons and ancestral spirits back to their graves and altars.

The Autumn festival (*Uchau*), also an occasion for much dancing and singing, centres on the shrine of *Sajjigor* in the Rumbur Valley. There, on an afternoon in August, the men of the valley and visitors from elsewhere gather in the sacred grove to await the arrival of shepherds bringing cheese from the mountain stables. Those who wait by the shrine—a square stone structure some four or five feet high with projecting wooden horse heads—have brought bread, which is placed by the shrine to be distributed later. When the shepherds arrive with their baskets of cheese a fire of sacred juniper branches is lit by the shrine and the priest chants a prayer. Then the bread and cheese is divided and shared out amongst everyone present. Even Moslems attend this ceremony sometimes, just to get free bread and

(Left) Villagers rest under a walnut tree during one of the annual festivals. Walnuts, together with dried mulberries and pomegranates, are a vital food source during the long, snow-bound winters.

(Below) The Kalash celebrate the 'Uchau' festival during August. After dancing and ritual observance, bread and cheese are distributed amongst everyone present—even to Moslem visitors.

